BBC

DOCTOR WHO

CHARLIE HIGSON

THE BEAST OF BABYLON

PUFFIN

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THE BEAST OF BABYLON

About Charlie Higson

Charlie Higson started writing when he was ten years old, but it was a long time before he got paid for doing it. On leaving university he was the singer in a pop group (The Higsons) before giving it up to become a painter and decorator. It was around this time that he started writing for television on *Saturday Night Live*. He went on to create the hugely successful comedy series *The Fast Show*, in which he also appeared. Other TV work includes *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)* and *Swiss Toni*.

He is the author of the bestselling Young Bond books, and *The Fallen* is the fifth book in his current horror series, The Enemy.

Charlie doesn't do Facebook, but you can tweet him @monstroso.

Books by Charlie Higson

The Young Bond series:
Silverfin
Blood Fever
Double Or Die
Hurricane Gold
By Royal Command
Danger Society: Young Bond Dossier
Silverfin: The Graphic Novel

The Enemy series:
The Enemy
The Dead
The Fear
The Sacrifice
The Fallen

Monstroso (Pocket Money Puffins)

1

Ali was having a picnic with her family in the little water park on the edge of town when she first saw the Doctor. He was striding across the grass, glancing around, eyes a bit wild, as if he was searching for something. He looked like a typical man. Two arms, two legs. The usual. Short hair. Sticking-out ears and a big nose. Black leather boots. Black leather jacket. Men were like that, weren't they? They got off on wearing the skin of dead animals. Always made Ali feel a bit funny. The idea of it.

He was sort of grinning. Not really a happy grin, though. Slightly crazy.

And he seemed to be in a hurry.

He spotted Ali's family and came over, eyes as wide as his grin, trying to look friendly and polite, and failing badly. He didn't look like the normal sort of tourist they got round here, or a businessman on a trip, but he was definitely a traveller of some sort. Ali felt the familiar sour sting of jealousy she always felt around travellers. Wishing she could escape her boring little life. She wondered where this man was from. When he spoke, though, he didn't have any trace of a foreign accent, and Ali was impressed.

'You haven't seen anything, have you?'

'Seen what?' Ali's dad replied. She could tell he was a little freaked out by this man appearing out of nowhere. He hadn't even said hello or anything, just blurted out his question. Definitely in a hurry.

'Never mind. You'd know it if you'd seen it.'

'Know what?'

'Never mind. Forget it.'

Ali's dad struggled up and stood between the man and his family. Obviously thought there might be trouble.

'I'm sorry to have bothered you,' said the man. He looked at Ali's family, saw her younger sister, and his expression changed. He was

worried now. ‘It’s just …’

‘Just what?’ Ali’s dad was trying to sound tough and brave. Two things he wasn’t. He was a wimp really, wouldn’t hurt a fly, but this strange man wasn’t to know that.

‘Just … maybe …’ The man was struggling to say what he wanted. ‘Maybe you should finish your picnic and get back home. Quickly, quite quickly – like *now*.’

‘I don’t see why I should –’

‘Dad, it’s all right,’ Ali said. She was better at reading people than her father. She turned to the man. ‘Are we in some kind of danger?’

‘You could say that. You could also say, “Come on, let’s do as the man says and go home.”’ He looked around anxiously, scanning the trees on the edge of the park. When none of Ali’s family made a move, he sighed and carried on talking, fast and impatient.

‘I’ve been following someone, some*thing*, chasing them really, halfway across the universe, if you must know.’

‘Who?’

‘A man, two men. Well, they’re the same man, except he’s not a man at all. That probably doesn’t make a lot of sense to you. Look, I’d better go. I’m really sorry to have ruined your picnic; it looks lovely, but … well, a lot more than your picnic could be ruined.’ As he rattled on he had started picking up stuff and throwing food into Mum’s basket.

‘Just get away from here!’ he shouted when still none of Ali’s family moved. ‘Far away.’

And then he stopped what he was doing, and cocked his head as if he’d heard something. ‘Oh, Castor and Pollux,’ he muttered, dropping a plate of boiled eggs. ‘Not good. That’s really not good at all.’

And then he was gone. Running off across the grass.

‘Well, I mean …’ said Ali’s dad. ‘What was all that about?’

Mum tutted and started tidying up.

‘I think we should do what he says,’ said Ali.

‘Why?’ said Dad. ‘He’s obviously nuts.’

Just then there came a great shout that seemed to fill the sky.

‘Well, there’s that, for a start,’ said Ali, packing things away just like the man had done.

And then there was another cry, almost a scream, and there, above the treetops, was something that Ali found hard to take in. A man, but a man taller than the tallest building in town, and next to him another man. '*The same man*,' the stranger had said, and she saw what he'd meant. They were separate physically but somehow they were both the same living thing: identical, moving together, their faces showing the same blank expression.

Ali froze as her mind tried to take this all in, too scared to move, gripped by a giant, cold claw. She had the overwhelming thought that she could never understand what a creature like this would be thinking, except that it wouldn't care one iota about her and her family.

And then she wondered if she was really seeing it at all.

The two linked figures were very faint as if they weren't even there, just made of cloud and smoke and swirling leaves. And there was the stranger, holding something shining in his hand. One of the giants had scooped him up and he was yelling something, and the giants bellowed and there was a flash and everything started swirling, so that instead of two giants there was a tornado, a whirlwind, a great dancing dust devil, and the stranger spun round and round, twisting up into the sky. Then there was a final huge shout and they all disappeared.

This happened in less than three beats of Ali's heart – seeing the thing, her feeling about the alien nature of its mind, the *thinness* of it, the stranger being lifted up, the twister – and it was gone.

Then there was a great punch to her chest, the air was sucked out of her, her tubes popped and she felt suddenly sick. She moaned and closed her eyes. Her whole head was ringing and there was a bad, metallic taste in her mouth. She could hear her little sister crying.

And then Dad's voice.

'Great gods … Great gods. What was that?'

Ali felt something touch her. She opened her eyes. It had started to rain. Only it wasn't rain. Tiny silver droplets were falling from the sky. They dissolved as soon as they touched the ground. All except one. A larger piece that sat there. A silver sphere. Perhaps the thing the stranger had been holding. She picked it up. It was

much heavier than it looked and very cold to the touch. She put it into her carrying pouch quickly before Mum or Dad saw it.

'We should get inside,' she said. 'Away from here, like he said, the *man* …'

The Doctor. That's what he was called. Although she didn't yet know it.

She also didn't yet know that he wasn't a *man* at all.

2

Ali wondered what had happened to the strange man, whether he had survived the fight, whether she would ever see him again, but it was only a few days later and the great wandering planet of LM-RVN had barely danced halfway across the sky when he came back into her life.

She was on her way home from college at the end of a long and boring day and had stopped off at the lake to stare into its murky depths. It was starting to grow dark and the moons were casting silver splashes over the water. It looked insanely beautiful. She threw in a stone and wished it was the holidays and the water was warmer and it was safe to go for a swim – properly go for a swim. She only really felt alive when she was in the water.

And then she saw his reflection, distorted by the ripples from the stone, but still unmistakably him. *The Doctor*. She felt a little stab of happiness. He was all right.

'I want it back,' he said.

'What?' she said without even turning round.

'You know what.'

'How can you be so sure I've got it?' she said, feeling the sphere hanging heavy in her carrying pouch.

'You know,' said the Doctor, 'when I first saw you I said to myself, here's someone special.'

Now Ali did turn. She'd thought the exact same thing about him. It was then that she noticed a large box of some sort standing in the tall weeds, half-hidden under the trees. It was blue, looked like it was made of wood and had foreign writing on it. Her mind started to turn.

'This thing you're looking for,' she said. 'What is it? Why should I give it back to you?'

'I can't tell you that. Let's just say that the fate of a planet, an insignificant little planet, but a planet I'm rather fond of, is in your

power. Besides, it's not yours. I lost it in a fight.'

'I saw that,' said Ali. 'It didn't look like much of a fight to me, more a massacre, really. You weren't exactly winning.'

'I had a plan … It sort of worked.'

'And the plan involved the thing you're looking for? Which I'm not going to give to you until you tell me exactly what it is.'

'Then I'll have to make you, won't I?' The Doctor glared at Ali.

Ali laughed. 'Who are you fooling?'

The Doctor shrugged and gave Ali one of his mad grins that was almost a snarl.

'I may not know that much about men,' said Ali. 'But I can tell that you're not, like, one of the violent ones.'

The grin became a gurn. 'You're right. I'm not. I'm the Doctor, by the way.'

'I'm Ali.'

'Pleased to meet you, Ali.'

'You're a trickster, Doctor, not a warrior.'

'Right again. And something tells me I can't trick you.'

'No. You can't.'

'So it's stalemate.'

'Let's trade,' said Ali, and the Doctor sat down on a rock, started taking off his shoes and socks.

'OK,' he said.

'I've got the – what do you call it? Our little silver ball that weighs nearly as much as that boulder you're sitting on.'

'Let's call it an orb.'

'OK. *I've* got the orb,' said Ali. 'What can *you* offer me?'

'What do you want?'

'Information.'

'Go on. I'll answer any question you like.' The Doctor was rolling up his trousers now. He obviously meant to go in the lake, but if it was only up to his knees it would be safe.

'What was that thing?' she asked. 'That giant thing? Those two giant things?'

The Doctor thought for a while. 'He … It … is a *Starman*,' he said at last. 'A star-eater. He can travel through space and time, fuelled by the energy he drains from stars. He's pretty much a star himself

– in every sense of the word.'

The Doctor got up and dipped his feet in the lake. He gave a little theatrical gasp at how cold it was.

'And the orb is some kind of weapon,' said Ali.

'Well …' The Doctor was intrigued. 'What makes you say that?'

'You were holding it. I saw a flash in the sky. Why else would you want it back so badly? And why couldn't you tell me what it was? I'm thinking it's because you're not supposed to have it. It's not yours … I think you stole it.'

The Doctor had gone in up to his knees and the bottoms of his trousers were under water. He didn't seem to notice. He was staring at Ali, his head tilted to one side. 'You're very clever, aren't you, Ali?' he said.

'So I'm told.'

'Where's the orb?' There was a harder edge to the Doctor's voice. Playtime was over.

Ali glanced up at the darkening sky, saw the moons receding, each one smaller and dimmer, thinking of all that was out there, in the infinite reaches of space. Then she looked at the blue wooden box under the trees and something clicked.

'That's a spaceship, isn't it?' she said.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Well, you're a traveller, aren't you?'

'You could say that.'

'I'd *kill* to travel,' said Ali. 'This planet, we get travellers from everywhere.'

'It's in a terminus galaxy,' said the Doctor, coming out of the lake. 'It's a jumping-off point for a lot of places.'

'Exactly. That's why the Starman came here, isn't it?' said Ali. 'He was on his way somewhere else, and you followed him here. You said so – halfway across the universe. So you must have got here somehow. And I don't think you came on a Virgo craft, a slow, unreliable space bus, not if you were chasing something. So you must have your own ship.'

'You're a regular Sherlock Holmes, aren't you?'

'A Sherlock what?'

'Never mind,' said the Doctor, and he moved closer to Ali. 'Just

someone from that other planet I was telling you about. Now if you're done showing off, can you give me the orb and I'll be out of your life.'

'You're always in such a hurry, aren't you?' said Ali, backing away. 'And you're in a real big hurry to get away now, so you wouldn't want to be far from your ship. And this wasn't here before, and it's very much not from round here, like *you*. So it stands to reason that this must be your ship. It doesn't look nearly big enough to travel through space, though, so it must be some kind of an illusion, bigger than it looks. Or maybe it exists partly outside of space and time. That makes it bigger on the inside …' Ali stopped, awestruck.

'Oh my days,' she said. 'It's a TARDIS. You've got a TARDIS.'

'I really, *really* don't know what you're talking about.'

'Yes you do.' Ali walked over towards the box. 'We learned about them in school, in science, you know – *theoretically* – that they *could* exist. I never believed they were real, though. I wanted to. I *so* wanted to. But I never did … until now. That is *so* cool.'

'On the other hand,' said the Doctor, and he folded his arms and leaned against the TARDIS, 'it could just be a big blue box.'

'And *you* must be a Time Lord,' said Ali. 'I mean, you fit the part perfectly. You look like a human but you're not human, you're pretty smug and you think you're the carp's whiskers –'

'Is there anything you *don't* know, Ali?'

'Not really. We also learned about Time Lords at school. In history. *Ancient* history. We were told the Time Lords had all died out a long time ago. But here you are.'

'Ali. Please.' The Doctor had dropped on to his knees with his hands clasped together. 'Time is running out.'

'Take me with you,' said Ali.

'I can't do that.' The Doctor shook his head.

'I'll give you the orb if you take me with you.'

'No, no, no. It's way too dangerous where I'm going.'

'Come on, Doctor, you're going to save your favourite planet. You're going to rescue a whole race. What does my one life matter compared to all theirs …?'

'Ali, you can't ask this of me.'

‘Besides – you might need some help.’

The Doctor stared at Ali for a very long time and then his wonky Time Lord face split into the maddest, wildest, strangest grin she’d seen yet.

‘I can’t get rid of you, can I?’ he said.

3

‘The planet’s called Earth. Where humans first came from. Long way back.’

‘I’ve heard of it.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me, Little Miss A-Star.’

The Doctor was busy at the controls of the TARDIS, his face lit by the glowing green column that rose and fell rhythmically like the beating heart of the ship. Ali was amazed at how quickly she’d got used to being in here after the first mind-bending experience of stepping through a door into another world. It all felt weirdly normal now. To tell the truth, some of the equipment looked decidedly primitive and old-fashioned compared to what she was used to. Not that she pretended to understand what everything did, but this was the relic of a civilisation that had died out a long time ago.

The Doctor had darted about madly, throwing switches, twiddling dials, jabbing buttons as they’d set off, and now that they were under way he’d calmed down enough to tell her about how he’d come to turn up on Karkinos.

‘I’d been down on Earth trying to save the old place again,’ he went on. ‘And there was this thing, this creature, call it what you want … Actually it’s usually called a Nestene Consciousness. Just another bully, another demigod like the Starman, wanting to feed off the planet and drain it dry. Not nice. I was trying to find it and put a sock in it and I was helped by a girl – about your age, as it goes. A lot like you in many ways.’

‘What was her name?’ asked Ali, curious.

‘Rose. Rose Tyler,’ said the Doctor.

‘A human girl?’

‘Yeah. The only type they had on the planet back then. You see, in that corner of the universe space travel hadn’t really taken off just yet, so there were only native creatures on the planet and the

humans were the only halfway sentient ones. Them and meerkats.'

'Tell me about Rose Tyler.' Ali watched as the Doctor peered at some kind of monitor and, satisfied, stepped back from the controls. He turned and beamed at her.

'Rose? She was funny and tough and clever and resourceful. She saved me, and she saved her boyfriend Mickey, and she saved the whole damned planet.'

'Oh, you're in *love*,' said Ali with more than a touch of sarcasm.

'No,' said the Doctor, and he wasn't smiling any more. 'Don't make that mistake, Ali. Let's just say she was good company. And I like company.'

'It must be difficult for you,' said Ali. 'Living as long as you do.'

'Oh, I've had so many companions in my life,' said the Doctor. 'Susan and Barbara and Ian, Prince Egon, Jamie, Polly, Ella McBrien, Sarah-Jane Smith, Leela … They come, and, inevitably, they go. But without them …'

'You're the last lonely Time Lord.'

'What is it with teenage girls?' asked the Doctor. 'Always digging. When I met Rose I'd only recently regenerated. I'm sure you know all about regeneration – you've probably got a diploma in it – and I was feeling a bit like a soft-shell crab, waiting for my new shell to harden – if you'll pardon the analogy. I was still finding my feet. I thought: new body, new start, new companion.'

'So what happened? Did you ask her?'

'I did, as it goes. And she turned me down. I'd come on too strong, I guess, played my cards too soon. As I say, I was still adjusting to the regeneration – not quite calibrated. She just looked at me. She's got a funny face, big mouth and big eyes … a big heart.'

'You *are* in love.'

The Doctor ignored Ali and ploughed on. 'And that's why she couldn't come. Because she cared more about what she'd have to leave behind than what I could offer her. Her family, her boyfriend, her *life*. I couldn't argue with that. I couldn't expect her to drop everything and go gallivanting off with a perfect stranger in search of adventure.'

'Are you saying *I* don't have a big heart?' Ali blurted out before

she could stop herself.

'No. Not at all.'

'You think I don't care, don't you?' Ali was trying not to get angry. She was sure that it would show. That she'd be flushed an ugly red.

The Doctor looked wide-eyed and innocent, a little dismissive.

'Did I say that? I don't remember saying that. As I explained before we took off, I can land you right back on Karkinos a second after we left. Nobody will ever know. I didn't have time to tell Rose that.'

'I know you didn't really want me to come with you, though.' Ali could feel herself shaking.

'You're here, aren't you? So stop your whingeing. Now, hold on to something – I need to get ready for landing.'

His goofy grin calmed her down a little.

'But if you already saved the Earth,' said Ali, gripping a rail, 'why do you need to go back there?'

'It's like this, Ali.' The Doctor had started to pace about. 'I said goodbye to Rose, I came in here and started up the engines and, the next thing I knew, lights were flashing, alarms were blaring. It was all bells and buzzers and bleepers and hooters and tweeters, and I knew that didn't mean my dinner was ready in the microwave – you don't know what I'm talking about, but it doesn't matter. What *does* matter is that the TARDIS is uniquely tuned to sense any problems with the fabric of time, and just as it had alerted me to the presence of the Nestene Consciousness in a place called London back in Rose's time, now it was alerting me to a very similar problem somewhere else on the planet, a few thousand years earlier.'

'The Starman?'

'Give the girl a big round of applause. Yes, they're dangerous entities, born when stars collapse, when they become black holes and white dwarfs and red dwarfs and wormholes, or whatever you call them in your neck of the intergalactic woods. When they collapse they alter the shape of space and they alter the shape of time, and sometimes a Starman is created, a cosmic being with primitive consciousness. And if you're not careful, they can escape

from their own time and go trampling through existence, wiping it clean and rewriting history, rewriting the laws of science itself. I suppose you could call them gods, if you wanted, and it was always one of the duties of the Time Lords to police the universe and snap the cuffs on them when they popped up where they shouldn't. Nasty things, you know, *gods*, they don't much care for anyone other than themselves. Don't like any competition. So off I went to try to head this Starman off at the pass.'

'Why did it look like there were two of them?' Ali asked, remembering those two ghost-like giants towering above the trees.

'Yeah, he looked like twins, and it looked like they weren't really there,' said the Doctor. 'That's because it was existing in several different dimensions at once. Now, this orb –' he picked up the silver ball from where it had been sitting in a cradle on the control console – 'was created in a very similar way to the Starman. It has the power of a collapsed star in it. It was made by a very clever, and not very nice, character called the Exalted Holgoroth of All Tagkhanastria. And he was no better than the bloody Starman! He was only really interested in using the orb to build a space empire. So I thought I'd kill two pterodactyls with one stone. I paid a visit to the Holgoroth, pretending to be an emissary from the Crab Nebula, and I stole his orb right out from under his nose – which is an exciting story I'll tell you one day if you're very good – and I went after the Starman and got to him before he reached Earth. In the process he nearly killed me.'

'I saw.'

'But I had superior firepower!' The Doctor tossed the orb into the air; it seemed to hover there for a moment, and then fell into the open palm of his hand with a slap. 'And I knocked him for six! Well, into the twenty-sixth dimension anyway. He's safe there for a while. Can't do much damage – space and time's always been a right mess in there. Might even sort things out a bit. Who knows?'

'So if you flipped him into another dimension, why are we going back to Earth?' Ali was trying to keep up and take all this in, but she was struggling.

'It seems that my little ding-dong on your planet with the space twins has sent ripples spreading out.' The Doctor mimed this with

wiggling fingers. ‘Always the same – you push one problem under the carpet and another one pops out on the other side. Cause and effect, unforeseen consequences, the butterfly’s wing.’

‘What?’ Now Ali really *had* lost the thread.

‘In a nutshell,’ said the Doctor, ‘there’s another Starman, a worse one, a more powerful one, heading for Earth and I need to stop it. In fact, it’s probably already there.’

‘Can’t you just do what you did with the twins and grab it before it arrives?’ Ali asked.

‘No. That’s the thing. Me and this new Starman exist in the same time stream. A side-effect of using the orb. Unforeseen consequences. Turns out the magic orb is not as special as the Holgoroth claimed. Should have read the small print – “*This item may not work as advertised!*” Until I send this new Starman packing, the two of us have a time tag on us. We’re linked.’ The Doctor was back at the console again now, studying screens and meters, his hands a blur as they moved over the controls.

‘So now we’re landing on Earth,’ he shouted, ‘two thousand years before the birth of Christ …’

‘Who?’

‘He was a bit like Sherlock Holmes. Knew the answers to everything. Very good at solving mysteries. Some humans use him to measure time.’

‘And whereabouts on Earth?’

‘A place called Babylon. Lovely little spot – very hot in the summer, though.’

‘Doctor?’ said Ali. ‘One last thing.’

‘Make it quick.’

‘This new Starman, what will it look like?’

‘Good question.’

‘I mean, will it look like the twins?’

‘Probably not. It depends on what planets it’s absorbed. It could look like anything – a lizard, a fish, a goat, a sea urchin, an anglepoise lamp or a giant amorphous blob. One thing I *can* tell you, though: it probably won’t look very nice.’

4

At that moment, Zabaia, High Priest of Marduk, was on his knees, his face pressed into the cold stone of the temple floor, his bony legs trembling. A wind from nowhere was kicking sand and grit into the air and throwing it under his robes, and the roar of some terrible dragon was screeching in his ears. He dared not look up, but he could sense that there was a new presence here. The shape of the space had changed. *Something* had appeared. Perhaps their god had arrived? Marduk himself.

He gathered up enough courage to open one eye and look across the floor to see what the guards were doing. He was pleased that they, like him, had prostrated themselves before this apparition. No one would laugh at him for a coward now.

'It is a dragon's egg,' he heard one of them whisper.

'It is hatching!' said another hoarse voice, and a third voice offered up a prayer for Marduk to protect them all.

Zabaia waited, his heart thumping, his breath caught in his mouth. Waited for the wrath of Marduk to come down upon his head.

'Hello there.'

Slowly Zabaia raised his head. A man was standing there, dressed strangely in black clothing. And behind him – what fool would imagine it was an egg? – was a large blue chest. The man was eyeing Zabaia with the same puzzled expression that Zabaia himself no doubt wore.

'Everything all right?' said the man. 'There's really no need to kneel to me, you know. A simple handshake will do.'

Gurgurum, captain of the royal guard, was standing by his king, Hammurabi, looking down on the world from the balcony outside the king's quarters. From here, high up on the palace walls, they could see all of Babylon. But Hammurabi was not pleased. He was tugging at his beard, fiddling with the beads and precious rings that

were knotted into it.

'My family ruled Babylon when it was little more than a dusty desert village and they built it into the largest city in the world,' he was saying.

Gurgurum was proud to serve mighty Hammurabi. It was Hammurabi who had enlarged the temples, raised the city walls and strengthened the embankments that stopped the great, muddy Euphrates from flooding the streets. It was Hammurabi who had made Babylon safe. And a safe city can grow rich and powerful. Every day new houses were built, each one grander than the last, and down below Gurgurum could see the people going about their business, haggling in the market-places, hurrying down the crowded streets and across the many bridges.

Outside the city walls, spreading out across the lush green flood-watered plain between the Euphrates and the Tigris, were fruit trees and date palms and wheat fields teeming with slaves hard at work growing the food that fed Hammurabi's empire. And beyond the fertile plain was the desert, its hills and baked earth the same reddish yellow as the buildings in the city.

'You are the greatest ruler the world has ever seen,' said Gurgurum. 'And you have built the greatest empire the world has ever known. In a few short years you have defeated the kingdoms of Eshnunna, Elam, Larsa and Mari. You have trampled their people underfoot and made them slaves; you have slaughtered their young men. You have brought glory to Babylon.'

'But do you not feel it, Gurgurum?' said Hammurabi, slamming his fists on the stone balustrade of the balcony.

'Feel what, my king?'

'As if a shadow has fallen across our world. I fear that all this might crumble. That our enemies will snatch it away from us.'

'We are prepared,' said Gurgurum. 'Your army stands ready. Your chariots ride round the city walls to frighten off any enemy tribes who might be foolish enough to launch an attack.'

'But the priests have warned me that our great god, Marduk of the Fifty Names, might abandon the city,' said Hammurabi. 'We sacrifice to him, we wash the mouth of his statue, but the gods don't much care for the feeble concerns of man. Our cities are dust

beneath their feet.'

'You should not listen to the priests,' said Gurgurum bitterly. 'They are like frightened old women. Your strength is in your army. You must rule with the sword.'

Gurgurum knew, though, that there was some truth in Hammurabi's words. Tremors had been felt beneath the earth lately, and the wall of a temple had collapsed, killing a priest and three of his servants.

'I *must* listen to the priests,' said Hammurabi. 'They are the only ones who can tell me what the gods are thinking. I cannot sleep for fear that Babylon is under attack from mysterious forces, that my enemies plot against me, that they will send spies and sorcerers to undermine me.'

'Then kill your enemies. Kill everyone in Babylon who is not a Babylonian,' urged Gurgurum. 'Let the Euphrates run red with their blood. Choke the Tigris with their bodies. They have not earned the right to justice. Trust in your strength and the sharp edges of your soldiers' weapons.'

'And what if our enemies are the gods themselves?' said Hammurabi. 'What then?'

'Then we pray, my lord,' said Gurgurum and he laughed darkly.

Hiding to the side of the open doorway, Ali was anxious to see out of the TARDIS and get her first glimpse of an alien planet. But she was obeying the Doctor. The last thing he'd told her before they'd landed was to keep herself hidden and look after the TARDIS for him until he was sure it was safe.

'I don't want you in any trouble.'

'I can look after myself,' Ali had protested.

'I'm sure you can,' the Doctor had said. 'But I don't want any upsets here, no unknown unknowns, no surprises that I'm not expecting.'

'If you're expecting it, then it's not a surprise.'

'Those are my favourite sorts of surprises, Ali – the unsurprising ones. We need to be discreet, OK? I just need to neutralise the Starman and get out quick.'

So did this count as neutralising the Starman? She wasn't sure.

Though when the Doctor had first opened the TARDIS door he'd made a tiny disappointed sound, as if he'd made a mistake in his calculations and hadn't quite been expecting to find what was out there.

She could hear his voice through the doorway.

'I need to speak to someone in charge. It's rather urgent.'

'Who are you? Are you a messenger from the gods?'

'Er … You could say that … Yes, let's say I'm a messenger from the gods.'

Ali wished she could see what was happening. There was the sound of scraping feet, of voices in hurried conversation and then a cry of panic from the Doctor. 'No! Don't go in there!'

A man appeared in the doorway, shorter than other men she had seen, wearing a gleaming bronze helmet. He was bare-chested and carrying a spear and shield. When he saw Ali he gasped in surprise and before he could do anything else Ali instinctively lashed out with one of her antenodes. It whipped through the air and struck the man in the side of the neck. His body convulsed and he dropped backwards out of the doorway, dead to the world.

The Doctor had told her to protect the TARDIS, hadn't he?

She didn't think anyone else would try to board in a hurry, but she waited there by the door just in case.

There was shouting from outside now and the sound of a scuffle. How she wished she had a better view. And then she heard the Doctor's voice, strained and muffled. 'Don't move, Ali!' he shouted. 'Shut the door and wait for me. I'll be all right!'

She reached over and pushed the door closed. It hadn't sounded good. The Doctor was in trouble, she was sure of it. If only …

Well, why not? He hadn't told her not to touch the controls. She was sure there would be something here. Some piece of equipment that would help her see what was happening to the Doctor. Even a cranky old relic of ancient tech like the TARDIS would have scanners of some sort. Surely …

She hurried over to the console, located the main access screen, leaned forward and worked the controls with her fingers, just as she'd spent hours doing at school and college and in her room back home on Karkinos. She was good with technology, and even though

this was ridiculously retro she thought she'd have a pretty good idea how to find what she needed.

There.

A few swift adjustments and she had a clear view of the outside. Another tweak and she had sound to go with it. Luckily, the telepathic field of the TARDIS's translation circuit allowed her to understand every word of what was being said.

Unluckily, it really *didn't* sound good.

A man wearing elaborate embroidered robes and carrying some kind of a staff was shouting at the Doctor, who was surrounded by more men armed with spears.

'Liar! You are not an emissary of the gods, you are a man, like me. You are a spy and the law of Hammurabi clearly states what must be done to spies!'

5

Gurgurum was looking down on to the Place of Execution from the balcony outside the royal quarters. There was a hum of voices as soldiers formed into neat ranks on the packed red dirt of the square. Other soldiers lined the battlements on the surrounding walls. And past the city walls, out on the plain, Hammurabi's army stood still, as if waiting.

Gurgurum watched as the king came out of the palace gates directly below him. He was surrounded by his slaves, advisers and priests. His royal guard marched at his side. But not Gurgurum. Lightning flashed in the east and Gurgurum shivered. There were storm clouds gathering over the hills, sucking up sand from the desert and darkening the midday sky. The warmth had gone out of the day.

He wanted to be down there with his king. He should be at his side, but he had been ordered to stay up here and guard the royal family.

He watched as the king settled on to his dais and waited while Prisoner's Gate was opened and three of the city judges led in the spy, flanked by a unit of heavily armed soldiers. Gurgurum felt useless up here and it fed his anger and hatred. This man was a foreigner, an outsider, he had no pure Babylonian blood in his veins and so was not worthy of a trial.

Gurgurum gripped the hilt of his sword tightly. He wished he could leap from the balcony, run across the square and plunge his blade into the prisoner's belly himself.

Ali was pacing up and down, drumming her fingertips against her teeth as she always did when she was anxious and thinking hard. She had watched helplessly as the Doctor had been dragged away, shouting about the Starman and the danger they were all in. She couldn't bear to think about what they were doing to him out there. Time was passing, marked by the clicking of her feet on the metal

floor of the Doctor's ship. He had told her to stay put, but if she didn't do something they were going to kill him. And if they killed him, there was no hope of defeating the Starman.

What made it worse was that the Doctor had left the orb in its cradle on the console, so, even if by some miracle the Babylonians didn't kill him, when the Starman attacked he would have no way of defeating it.

And then she heard a thump.

She glanced at the scanner. Several guards had gathered round the TARDIS and one of them was battering at the door with his spear. Ali doubted he could do any damage, but it made her angry and, though she tried to damp the anger down, it grew inside her until she was glaring at the screen.

Thump.

'You're making me mad,' she hissed. 'And you wouldn't like me when I'm mad. Believe me.'

Thump.

Still the puny idiot bashed his silly spear against the door.

Thump.

Ali's whole body felt hot. Her anger was like a physical being inside her, bursting to get out. The image on the screen was dimming as the red mist of battle settled on her.

Thump.

One of the other guards laughed and said something obscene about the TARDIS and that did it for Ali.

She was not going to stand for that.

She was not going to stay shut up in here.

She was not going to hang around and let the Doctor get killed.

And so she listened, timing the thumps, tuning in to the man's rhythm, slowly creeping over to the door. She waited, counting, and then yanked the door open just as the guard lunged again. He was thrown off balance and stumbled through the suddenly empty space. She was ready for him and kicked him in the chest. He flew back, knocking over two of his startled friends, and now she was out and moving fast. The guards hadn't been expecting this and they hesitated, trying to make sense of this new threat. As two of them broke away and fled screaming towards the temple doorway,

Ali lashed – one, two – with her antenodes and they went down, stunned. It would be a long while before *they* woke up.

That left three more, plus the three who were still on the ground, scuttling away from her on their backs, yelling in terror and panic.

There was no time to think. Ali had to get out of here and find the Doctor. And she mustn't let anyone sound the alarm. Her antenodes were accurate and effective weapons, but she had used them both in the attack and it would take up precious time to curl them back in and make them ready again.

As she was processing all this information, one of the guards threw his spear. It cracked harmlessly off her armour – but that did it now. The rage came on her. There was no turning back. No more trying to be nice and stun the stupid men. She would use lethal weapons …

She advanced …

And the guard who had thrown the spear screamed …

And died.

6

Hammurabi eyed the prisoner curiously. He had claimed to be a doctor not a spy, but could not explain how he had emerged from inside the strange blue cabinet that had appeared in the middle of the temple. Hammurabi feared magic, and this man was a sorcerer, there was no doubt about it. A sorcerer and a spy. This was a worm that could destroy the whole fruit. Hadn't his priests warned him against just such an infiltrator? He was frightened. He had to save his city and protect his people, so the sorcerer had to be got rid of quickly before he had time to spread his poison.

Hammurabi had hastily rounded up three judges, who had been enjoying lunch together in one of the taverns near the river, and he had instructed them what the punishment should be. This way, the sorcerer's death could act as an offering to Marduk.

The chief judge now raised his hand to deliver the sentence. 'Cut out the spy's heart,' he shouted.

'Which one?' said the sorcerer, a mad grin on his white-skinned face.

'You will be silent,' screeched the chief judge.

'I will *not*, actually,' said the sorcerer. 'I always understood that the great and wise Hammurabi was a *just* king. A king who was proud of the laws he had written down. A king who would always let an accused man defend himself and not call him guilty without fair trial.'

'There is nothing you can say that will change my mind,' said Hammurabi, fearing that the sorcerer would use clever words and magic to cloud his mind. He would not listen. He *must* not listen. 'The law is the law. And the punishment for spies and sorcerers is to have their hearts cut out.'

'*Nothing* I can say?' shouted the sorcerer. 'What if I told you that you are in very great danger? What if I told you that your nice city, your kingdom, your empire, your *whole world* was about to be

attacked by a being of such immense power that it will make your army look like toy soldiers, and when it's done with you there will be nothing left of mighty Babylon except ashes and cinders?'

'My priests have already warned me,' said Hammurabi, waving a hand dismissively.

'Really?' The sorcerer raised his eyebrows. 'They're cleverer than they look.'

'And it is clear that *you* are the threat they warned me of.'

'Wait, listen to me –'

'Enough of this,' said the chief judge. 'The sentence must be carried out.'

'No. You must listen to me!' The sorcerer looked worried for the first time. He struggled as four guards grabbed him and roughly dragged him towards the execution stone.

'The Starman is coming!' he yelled. 'The Great Beast! And I'm the only one who can stop it!'

From his vantage point on the royal balcony Gurgurum could see the man struggling as he was forced over the execution stone. He had heard his words and they'd made him uneasy. Gurgurum was a man utterly fearless in battle, yet now he felt the pricking of uncertainty.

The great beast of legend was coming … that was what the prisoner had said. What form would the Beast take? Where would it come from? How could they defend themselves against it?

The histories recorded the stories of the old gods. All the constellations in the sky were gods. The Babylonian zodiac taught children their names, and their parents used them to frighten them into obedience. It had been hundreds of years since the gods had walked the Earth. Would the Beast come down from the heavens in the form of a monstrous bull, a scorpion, a great lion? Or would it be some new and terrible monster?

He laughed at himself. He was behaving as if he was a little boy again, frightened of shadows. There were no monsters coming.

He heard a sound and turned quickly, his senses alert to any danger, peering into the darkness of the king's chambers.

And his heart throbbed in his chest.

It was here.

The Great Beast.

It was upon them.

And it was like nothing he had ever seen before.

It stood a whole head taller than any man, and there was something of a beetle about it and something of a crab or a crayfish from the river. It had six legs but only stood on four. Its segmented body was arched backwards so that its two front legs were held up and out like arms, one of them ending in a huge knobbled claw. It had a head of sorts with four black bead-like eyes, but worst of all was its mouth, a gaping hole in the centre of its face, filled with row upon row of tiny sharp jagged teeth and surrounded by waving feelers that seemed to claw at the air.

Gurgurum offered up a prayer to Marduk and charged inside, tugging his sword from the scabbard at his belt.

He couldn't hope to defeat this monster, but he would die trying.

He was a pure-born Babylonian.

7

‘I’ve come to Babylon to destroy the Beast,’ the Doctor shouted as the priest, Zabaia, raised a vicious curved blade above his head and murmured an incantation. ‘It’s here, I know it’s here.’

And then there was a scream. Zabaia paused, and the two guards let go of the Doctor as everyone in the courtyard looked up to see a soldier falling from a balcony, arms flailing. The Doctor heard Hammurabi shout, ‘Gurgurum!’ and looked away as the poor man hit the ground and was silenced.

There was something up there, coming out of the palace on to the balcony. Whatever it was, it must have thrown the man down. It reached the balustrade and stood there, raising itself up on long thin legs, seeming to peer down at the people in the square, opening and closing a massive claw.

‘It is the Great Beast!’ Zabaia shouted. ‘You must send up your guard, Lord Hammurabi, to crush it.’

‘That’s not a Starman,’ said the Doctor. ‘Too small.’

‘It is the Great Beast,’ Zabaia repeated, his voice becoming high-pitched with hysteria.

‘No it’s not,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s a friend of mine.’

‘A friend?’

‘Her name’s Ali. She’s from Karkinos, but you don’t really need to know that.’

‘You are a friend of monsters,’ Zabaia screeched. ‘You have brought them among us. Your treachery is exposed.’ He pointed a shaking finger at the two guards. ‘Hold him to the stone! We must kill him quickly!’

But nobody moved. None of the soldiers were looking at Zabaia, or the creature on the balcony, or the Doctor any longer. They were looking up, over the wall on the opposite side of the square, where darkness was filling the sky. And something vast was forming in that darkness.

Zabaia dropped his knife and flung himself to the ground, burying his face in the dirt.

'Now *that*,' said the Doctor as the guards let go of him, 'is a Starman. You should have listened to me, Hammurabi. Your great beast is here at last.'

From the balcony Ali had a better view of the new Starman than anyone. And she watched, transfixed, as it materialised on the plain outside the city walls. It was as tall as the giant twins had been but, just as the Doctor had warned her, it was stranger and more horrifying.

It had no back legs, just the tail of a rotten fish, huge and bloated, and it pulled itself along with two immense lizard-like arms. Its head had dangling fleshy tendrils and two horny protuberances jutting from the top. It had the same dead, distant eyes as the twins, and the same faint appearance as if it was there but somehow not there at the same time. The strangest thing of all was what looked like water gushing from its shoulders, giving the appearance of two long, drooping silver wings.

She had to get the orb to the Doctor. She could feel its weight in her carrying pouch. It was the only thing that could stop the Beast.

There were shouts from behind her. Soldiers were in the corridor leading to the king's chambers. From back there they would have no idea what was happening outside. Ali knew she should ignore them, but she could sense the rational part of her mind losing out to the battle rage.

She moved inside and made ready her antenodes where they lay down her back, feeling the familiar tingling sensation as they filled with poison. She flexed her claw as the red mist descended.

The guards crashed through the wooden door and staggered to a halt, staring at Ali in terror and disbelief, just as she had stared at the Starman.

Two of them had enough courage to throw their spears, but they couldn't penetrate her shell. Her antenodes whipped out together, taking one man round the ankle. He fell hard on the stone floor and now she was scuttling after the rest of them as they retreated out of the door. They couldn't hope to outrun her, her six legs were faster

than their two, and in a moment she was on them and her battle claw ripped into them.

‘That is one ugly goat-fish-type-thing,’ said the Doctor, running across the square towards a flight of steps that led up to the battlements.

‘Wait!’ It was Hammurabi, his face pale with shock. He hurried up to the Doctor and gripped him by the shoulders. ‘You said you could defeat the Beast. How? How do we do it? My army is ready, but –’

‘Your army doesn’t stand a chance,’ said the Doctor grimly. ‘Not against a thing like that. It’s a Starman; it eats whole planets for breakfast.’

‘Then how?’

The Doctor paused. He knew how. He had to get back to the TARDIS and get the orb, but there wasn’t time for that. With every second the Starman would be drawing strength from the ground. Once it fully materialised not even the orb could stop it.

‘It’s too late …’ he said, then laughed. It wasn’t too late at all. The cavalry was arriving. Good old Ali. Flushed dark with fury, she was crawling down the outside of Hammurabi’s palace like a big red cockroach, the orb held firm in her battle claw.

‘Good girl!’

She was acting true to form. The female was the deadliest of her species. When the safety of the group was threatened, the females went into battle and wouldn’t stop until their enemies were utterly destroyed.

8

Hammurabi's army had formed on the plain outside the high city walls: ranks of spearmen, bowmen, slingers and chariots. Camel riders trying to calm their nervous, snorting mounts. Officers shouting at the men to hold firm as the Starman advanced, spewing water to left and right.

'Coming through! Move aside!' The ranks parted as the Doctor, clinging to Ali's back and holding the silver orb with his free hand, charged through them.

This was too much for most of them and they dropped their weapons, trusting to prayer to get them through this insanity.

'Faster, Ali, faster,' cried the Doctor, and Ali speeded up. 'We've got no time left!'

Ahead of them, the enormous beast dipped its head, opened its jaws wide, showing the blackened stumps of teeth, and scooped up a section of the first two ranks of the army. It lifted its head, chewing, as men spilled out of its mouth and fell to the ground.

And behind it, Ali saw another shape and another, looming out of the black sky.

It was the twins.

'Doctor?'

'Just ignore them. The goat-fish must have ripped the dimensional wall and the other Starmen are following him through. Any minute now all of chaos is going to materialise, but if I can just get up there, to its mouth …'

Ali saw the great slug-like belly of the goat-fish, slithering forward along the ground, crushing trees and men beneath it as it came. Any moment now she too was going to be flattened if she wasn't careful.

She was battling her way through fleeing troops now as Hammurabi's army tried to get away from the Beast.

'Are you ready?' she yelled.

‘No. But whatever you’re going to do, just do it!’

Ali tensed her legs and with a grunt went into a Karkinian battle leap, flying through the air and landing halfway up the Starman’s tail, where she gripped its scales with her strong clawed legs. The body of the Beast was hot, intensely hot, but her shell protected her and she began to climb.

‘That’s it!’ The Doctor shouted his encouragement. ‘Go on, girl!’

She was up on the Starman’s back now, trying to ignore the gushing water. The Starman’s scaly flesh was pitted with huge sores, out of which poked the heads of what looked like giant maggots. Ali worked her way around them as she crawled up, like a tick on a sheep, and made it to the right shoulder. At last the Starman seemed to be aware that there was something on it. It turned its goat’s head, and its cold, dead eyes fell on the Doctor and Ali. It bared its teeth, opening its mouth wide, its slimy yellow tongue dripping saliva …

‘Excuse me while I do the boogaloo!’ shouted the Doctor, and he pulled back his arm and let fly with the orb, which sailed straight into the Beast’s gaping black maw.

Ali felt an enormous wave of hot air slam into her. The heavens seemed to open in a flash of intense white light and she was falling, falling in a cloud of silver snowflakes.

9

The Doctor lay on his back, staring up at a palm tree. It was very peaceful. He could hear birds singing. He felt like he could stay like this forever and lose himself in the lovely deep blue of the sky.

'Doctor?'

Fat chance. There was always something to do, someone to deal with, a problem to solve, a world that needed saving. He lifted his head and it felt as heavy as a sack of potatoes, as if it might fall off and roll away down a hill. His vision blurred and swam, and when he managed to refocus there was Hammurabi leaning over him, with Zabaia and the three judges.

'I am sorry I doubted you,' said Hammurabi. 'You were right, Doctor.'

'I usually am,' said the Doctor, and he closed his eyes. 'Now go away, I'm sleeping.'

'We must write about you in our histories,' said Zabaia. 'What is your name?'

The Doctor sighed and hauled himself up on to his elbows, blinking. He felt like every bone in his body must have been broken, but he could move all his limbs and wiggle his toes. It had been a close thing, though. Too close.

'You go through Marduk's fifty names,' he said to Zabaia. 'You'll probably find my name in there somewhere.'

'Marduk?'

The Doctor grinned at Zabaia – actually more of a grimace; it hurt like Helios to move his face. He fought off a wave of nausea and faintness. The chief judge held out a hand to help him to his feet.

'Get away from him!'

'No, Ali …'

But there was no stopping her. Ali sliced her way through a line of soldiers, and then swung her claw at the judge who had no time

to even scream before the pincers closed on him.

'You would have killed him,' Ali grunted. 'You and all the others. Now see how *you* like it.'

Ali dropped the judge, swatted Zabaia out of the way and advanced on Hammurabi, who collapsed to his knees, head bowed, hands gripped together.

'Ali … No …' The Doctor tried to stand, but swayed and felt consciousness slipping away. 'Stop. You've done enough. You have to stop. It's over …'

And at last Ali did stop. She picked the Doctor up and the last of her anger drained away. She looked around at the devastation, the bodies of the soldiers and the judge, Hammurabi on his knees in the dirt, quivering …

'Ali …' said the Doctor. 'I think it's time to go home.'

10

The TARDIS hummed and throbbed like the inside of the Doctor's head. He was still groggy. Still in pain. Still trying not to be angry with Ali, and with himself for giving in to her and bringing her along.

'I'm sorry,' she was saying, 'but they deserved their punishment. I should have killed them all.'

'You only did what you thought was right,' said the Doctor. 'This is why I usually take humans as my companions. They have … well, they have *humanity*. Not all of them, I'll give you that, but the ones I choose.'

Ali looked at the Doctor but said nothing.

'That's why I was reluctant to take you in the first place,' the Doctor went on. 'Not for your own safety, but for others. You Karkinians have a scary reputation, particularly the females, and having seen you in action I can see why. Remember what I told you when we first spoke, Ali? I'm not a warrior unless I have to be. It's not my way.'

'You killed the Starman.'

'I didn't kill him. I simply sent him back to where he can't do any harm.'

'But if I hadn't saved you –' There was bitterness in Ali's voice.

'I've somehow managed to survive for quite a long time without your help.'

'You ungrateful –'

'I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.' The Doctor put up his hands in surrender. 'You're right. Thanks. You *did* save me. Without you I'd have had to – I don't know – reboot again, or something, I suppose, and, yes, our goat-fish friend would probably have eaten the entire planet. So, yes, I will be eternally grateful to you. But your way, Ali … It's too risky. I wouldn't ever be able to go anywhere if I was worried you were going to go into a Karkinian war frenzy every

time anyone looked at me funny.'

'I can't help it –'

'Exactly. That's my point. You're from Karkinos. I thought maybe you were different. You *are* special, I'll give you that. And you're nearly as clever as me, but you're also a warrior, and I can't ask you to change that, because that's what you were born to be. And the best place for you right now is back on Karkinos, looking after your family.'

'I gave those humans a fright, though, didn't I?' said Ali, and she chuckled. 'They won't forget me in a hurry.'

'They won't *ever* forget you, Ali. You're a star and you always will be. You'll be *their* star. They'll name a constellation after you, and add you to their zodiac along with the twins and the goat-fish. You're my A-star girl.'

11

The moons of Karkinos were strung out across the sky, shining their light over the surface of the lake, as beautiful as Ali remembered them. She was standing by the waterside, the eight feeding fingers round her mouth clutching at the night-scented air and wafting the smells across her scent filters.

The Doctor assured her that it was only a short while after they'd left, though to Ali it felt like a lifetime. Nothing had changed. Somewhere under the water were thousands of eggs. Her mum had laid a batch of thirty in the spring and when it was summer they'd hatch and those that survived would crawl out and find their families and it would be safe to go swimming again without disturbing them. Usually only three or four a year from each batch survived. Mostly males, but every few years a precious female would make it.

Ali thought of her twenty-three brothers and her one solitary sister, waiting for her at home. How had she ever thought she could go off with the Doctor and abandon her precious little Gilia?

It felt good to be home.

A curly lugeron swooped low over her head, whooping, its wings rattling as it twisted and spiralled into the trees.

'Well …'

The Doctor was standing in the doorway of the TARDIS. She could tell he was anxious to be gone. This was difficult for him. Saying goodbye.

'Where will you go now?' she asked.

'Wherever I'm needed, I suppose.'

'You are *so* pompous.'

'Yeah, I am, aren't I?' There was that mad grin of his, the one she'd grown to love. 'One man – off to save the universe!'

'Alone again, or …?'

'Alone for now.'

Ali moved closer to him, her feet sinking into the soft mud. How good it felt: cool and moist and full of life. 'You know that *girl*,' she said. 'The one you were telling me about? Rose Tyler?'

'What about her?'

'You should try again. Now you're free of the time tag.'

'I gave it my best, Ali. This life wasn't for her.'

'I didn't have you down as a quitter, Doctor.'

'It's too late.'

'Ha! You're a Time Lord!' Ali laughed at him. 'How can anything be too late? I thought time had no meaning in your infinite, immortal, immaterial box of tricks. *Too late*, indeed. You just get back there.'

'Ali …'

'No, listen. Us girls, we might all look different, but we're pretty similar underneath. We like to appear responsible, to do what's expected of us, we're not supposed to be reckless and wild and go running off with dodgy space tramps like you. But give us a nudge and –'

'Ali –'

'No. You go straight back there now and you ask her again. But you've got to offer her more than just – well – *you*. I mean, you're a *Time Lord*, but you're not all *that*. Sell it to her.'

Now the Doctor laughed.

'That's why I need a companion,' he said. 'To keep my feet on the ground, and my head out of the clouds. To keep me from myself. It's people like Rose, and crustaceans like you, Ali, who keep me going, who remind me that it's not all over and it's not all about me. My people may have gone, but you have your people … and Hammurabi had his people, and everyone has their own people. And every one of them is precious.'

'Go on then,' said Ali. 'What are you waiting for? We're done here. Hurry back. And don't mess up this time. She sounds very special, your Rose.'

'Oh, she is. I really think she is.'

Ali raised a claw and touched the Doctor on the cheek. His skin felt warm, dry … alien.

The Doctor looked at the claw and flexed his wrist.

‘A long time ago, in a body far, far away, I had something like that,’ he said. ‘Though not on that scale.’

‘Goodbye,’ she said.

‘I’ll be seeing you,’ he said.

‘Will you?’

‘I’m sure I will. When I need you most. When I need a mighty warrior.’

And he was right … In a moment the TARDIS was gone, its grating call snatched away on the swirling wind of its departure. Ali returned home and her planet spun on round its sun, one star among countless others, and the stars turned, and the universe grew older, step by infinite step, marching closer to its end, and at last he came back, the hounds of hell on his heels …

But that’s another story.

12

The Doctor double-checked his time readings, his place readings and his face in the mirror. Practised a smile, a serious look, a sad face … settled on the smile, or at least the closest thing to a genuine human smile that he could manage. He took one last look around the TARDIS, made sure the old girl was looking – how would Rose put it? – *awesome*.

Yes. She was looking *well awesome*.

He pulled the lever that finalised the landing sequence and relished the familiar scraping noise of the TARDIS doing her thing. Then all was silent. He put the engine to sleep, closed down the systems and set the lights to an attractive warm orange glow. He realised he was still grinning and it was starting to hurt his face. *Not long now*. He took a deep breath and strode over to the door. Pulled it open.

He'd timed it just right. Rose was almost exactly where he'd left her, there, standing with Mickey, who was looking more than a little confused.

He grinned wider at Rose, relishing her surprise. He was a cheap magician sometimes, but it worked.

'By the way,' he said. 'Did I mention? It also travels in time.'

And he stepped back inside, leaving the door open. Was it enough? Rose wasn't the type to fall for a hard sell, but had he undersold it?

From the shadows behind the open door he spied on her. Watched her turn to Mickey and say something, kiss him, and then she was running towards the TARDIS, her hair flying, and he knew that everything was going to be all right.

He had his new companion.

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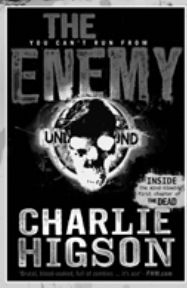
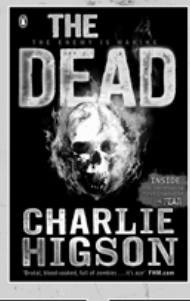
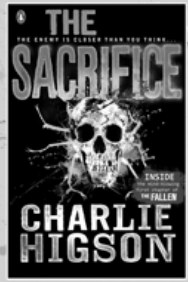
THEY'LL CHASE YOU.
THEY'LL RIP YOU OPEN.
THEY'LL FEED ON YOU...







THE ENEMY IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK.

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It all started with a Scarecrow.

Puffin is well over sixty years old. Sounds ancient, doesn't it? But Puffin has never been so lively. We're always on the lookout for the next big idea, which is how it began all those years ago.

Penguin Books was a big idea from the mind of a man called Allen Lane, who in 1935 invented the quality paperback and changed the world. **And from great Penguins, great Puffins grew, changing the face of children's books forever.**

The first four Puffin Picture Books were hatched in 1940 and the first Puffin story book featured a man with broomstick arms called Worzel Gummidge. In 1967 Kaye Webb, Puffin Editor, started the Puffin Club, promising to **'make children into readers'**. She kept that promise and over 200,000 children became devoted Puffineers through their quarterly instalments of *Puffin Post*.

Many years from now, we hope you'll look back and remember Puffin with a smile. **No matter what your age or what you're into, there's a Puffin for everyone.** The possibilities are endless, but one thing is for sure: whether it's a picture book or a paperback, a sticker book or a hardback, **if it's got that little Puffin on it – it's bound to be good.**

www.puffin.co.uk